



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

9 DEC 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger
Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Saigon Coup Rumors

1. My associates' initial reaction to the coup rumors recounted in MAC 15919 is one of great skepticism.

2. Allegations of a French-backed or French-inspired coup plot involving Tran Van Don, Ton That Dinh and/or Mai Huu Xuan -- jointly or individually -- come up frequently on the Saigon rumor circuit. It is, of course, true that none of these gentlemen has any great affection for Thieu. Don, at least, makes no secret of his desire to replace Thieu as South Vietnam's ruler, though his sights seem currently set on serving as Premier behind the facade of Duong Van ("Big") Minh's presidency. Rumors of Don's French connections have circulated for years, though hard evidence of such connections has yet to be produced. These rumors are fueled by Don's background, his personality, and the fact that his French is considerably better than his Vietnamese.

3. Mai Huu Xuan (head of the Military Security Service in the Diem era)

[redacted] is another officer classified in the Saigon rumor circuit as a French agent. Ton That Dinh, who played a key role in the tactical direction of the forces that overthrew Diem in 1963, held commissioned rank in the French Army, speaks excellent French and is often rumored to be a French agent, though no solid evidence is ever adduced to support such charges and prima facie, he would appear to be less suspect on these grounds than Xuan or Don.

4. Big Minh and Don have been working together in recent weeks. Don apparently hoped or believed that in President Nixon's 3 November speech, the President was going to announce a new political line that involved backing away from Thieu. Don seems to have sold Minh on this notion (apparently by telling a credulous Minh of private endorsements and encouragements that Don claimed to have received during Don's recent

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visit to the United States). The political cooperation between Don and Minh has been no secret, however, and hardly seems the basis of a coup plot.

5. Tran Van Khiem fits very ill with the above group. He is already prospering politically under Thieu, with steadily increasing responsibilities, prestige and power. Though he clearly has long term ambitions, Khiem is a cautious, patient man. It would be quite out of character for him to risk his present position by joining any cabal, particularly a cabal that, if successful, would certainly give him a position of lesser importance than the one he now holds.

6. The considerations outlined above, plus the fact that none of the alleged conspirators -- save Khiem -- has much present clout with the leaders of line military units, incline us to view this coup rumor with great skepticism. Strange things can happen in Vietnam, of course, and the Vietnamese political ball has taken some very odd bounces. On the basis of information now in hand, however, we are strongly inclined to assess MAC 15919 as gossip-inspired rumor. We have queried our colleagues in Saigon, however, and shall advise you immediately if we receive any new information indicating that this report may have more substance than we are now inclined to assign it.

Richard Helms
Director